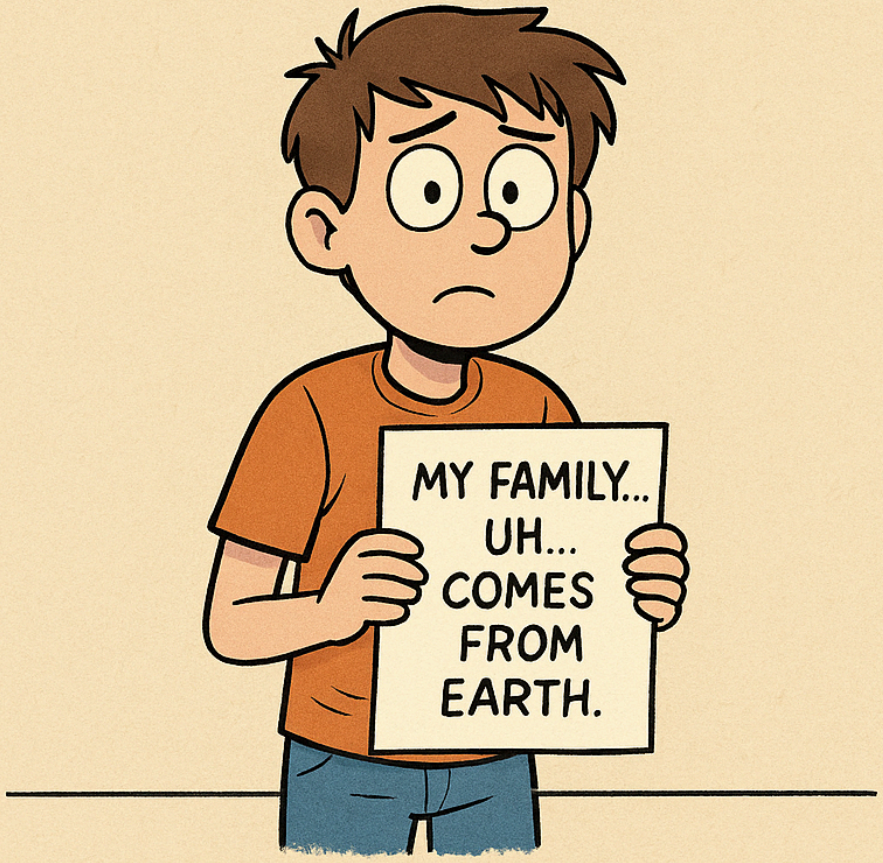
THE MOST AVERAGE KID EVER

(UNTIL I WASN'T)



BY HENRY NICHOLS

Chapter 1 - The Plan Was Simple... Then Life Happened

Monday

You know those kids who peak in middle school?

Yeah. I was one of them.

Not in a "star quarterback with perfect hair" way.

More like... *everything was just weirdly going my way.*

Teachers liked me.

Kids laughed at my jokes.

I once dropped my lunch tray and it landed perfectly upright, like it was auditioning for a commercial.

My name's Evan Turner, by the way.

And I used to think I was untouchable.

But then came The Day Everything Started Falling Apart.

It started at breakfast, which is already a bad sign because nothing dramatic is supposed to happen before 8 a.m. My mom was spreading peanut butter on toast like she was mad at the bread, and my dad was reading headlines out loud in his "concerned radio host" voice.

And then my mom asked the question that ruined my morning:

"Evan, do you have your project ready for school?"

Now, the normal human answer would be:

"Yes, I finished it responsibly, like a functional person."

My answer was:

"...Project?"

Apparently, my entire class had been working for two weeks on a "Family Heritage Presentation." Meanwhile, I'd been spending most of that time trying to beat Level 17 of *Laser Ninja Go!*

So yeah. Not off to a great start.

When I got to school, things got worse.

And by "worse," I mean my teacher, MS. Wilson, said:

"Evan, you'll be presenting first."

FIRST.

That's like being sacrificed to the class while everyone else sharpens their pencils and their judgment.

So I walked up to the front of the room with no poster, no photos, no flashy display board — just my unfortunate face.

I opened my mouth and said the only thing I could think of:

"My family... uh... comes from Earth."

Not my proudest moment.

People started whispering. One kid snorted.

MS. Wilson made a noise like she had swallowed a ghost.

And that's when I realized something terrible:

My lucky streak might actually be over.

But hey, that's just the beginning.

I didn't know it yet, but life was about to go from:

😎 “Everything is awesome!”

to

😬 “Everything is terrible!”

to

💥 “...wait, maybe things can get better again.”

But I guess you'll have to stick around for that part.

Chapter 2 - The Spiral Begins

Tuesday

I thought maybe after my “my family comes from Earth” presentation disaster, the universe would give me a break.

Nope. The universe doubled down.

It started in homeroom when I opened my locker and a tsunami of crumpled worksheets, old snack wrappers, and something that might have once been a banana came pouring out.

Of course it happened right when **Mason Hill**, the most annoyingly perfect kid in school, walked by. He stopped, raised one eyebrow, and said:

“Nice avalanche.”

Then he kept walking like he was in a movie where he was the main character and everyone else was background furniture.

Fine. Whatever. That wasn't even the worst part of the day.

The worst part was gym.

Coach Graham had decided we were doing the Presidential Fitness Test, a.k.a. the annual ritual where kids discover which muscles they've never used before. Usually I did pretty well. Not amazing, but not embarrassing.

This year? Total disaster.

First we had the pull-ups. I walked up with confidence—maybe too much confidence—and grabbed the bar. I pulled. My feet lifted maybe an inch off the ground. And then my arms gave up like they were filing a formal complaint.

I dropped down and coach Graham wrote something on his clipboard. I swear I heard him sigh.

Then came the mile run.

I used to be fast. Not "track star fast," but "decent enough to not get passed by people who still tie their shoes with velcro." But halfway through the second lap, my lungs started protesting like they were forming a union.

I slowed down. Then I slowed down more. Then *Ashley Whitmore*—who walks like a penguin and still somehow outran me—passed me.

When I finally crossed the finish line, coach Graham said, "Turner… did you get sick over the summer or something?"

I didn't even have the energy to respond. I just kind of nodded, even though the only thing I'd "gotten" over the summer was extremely good at video games.

By lunchtime, the whole school seemed to know something was off with me.

People whispered.

People stared.

Someone asked if I was "going through a phase."

I didn't even know what that meant.

All I knew was this: three days ago, I felt like everything in my life was finally going right.

Now it felt like someone had flipped a switch and put me on the "bad luck" setting.

I kept thinking: maybe tomorrow will be better.

But tomorrow had other plans.

Chapter 3 - When Friends Start Acting Weird

Wednesday

If there's one thing you learn fast in middle school, it's this:

when your life starts falling apart, people notice way more than you want them to.

At lunch, I sat down at my regular table with my two best friends, **Noah** and **Riley**. Usually we talk about important middle-school topics like whether robots will take over the world or which cafeteria taco is least likely to poison you.

But today, the second I sat down, they both looked at me like I'd walked in covered in bees.

Riley leaned forward. "Dude… are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be okay?" I said, even though I absolutely wasn't okay.

Noah shrugged. "Well, you bombed the heritage project, you nearly fainted in gym, and you look like you slept in your backpack."

"I didn't sleep in my backpack," I said. "I slept near my backpack."

Riley poked at her mashed potatoes like they offended her. "We're just saying… you don't seem like yourself."

And that hurt way more than anything Mason Hill could've said. Your friends are supposed to think you're doing fine even when you're clearly malfunctioning.

Before I could come up with an excuse, the table suddenly went quiet.

I looked up and saw Mason walking by with his tray, surrounded by his usual group of "cool but not actually that interesting" friends. He gave our table a glance and smirked.

That was it.

The smirk.

That look said, *Wow, Turner really fell off.*

Chapter 4 - The Day of the Triple Disaster

Thursday

I woke up thinking, "Today has to be better."

Spoiler alert: it wasn't.

Disaster #1: Science class.

We were doing a lab where you mix chemicals and hope nothing explodes. I followed all the directions. I measured everything exactly. And somehow, my beaker still turned into a foamy volcano that spilled all over my desk and onto the floor.

The whole room smelled like burnt marshmallows.

Ms. Linda said, "Evan… this wasn't even the kind of reaction we were studying."

Disaster #2: Group work in English.

We were supposed to pick partners. Normally, Noah and Riley grab me instantly, like we're magnets. But today, everyone hesitated.

Everyone.

Including them.

It wasn't even mean. It was worse. It was like they were thinking, *Maybe we should let Evan rest. He's not in peak form.*

I ended up partnered with **Trevor**, who spent the whole class picking the lint off his sweater and saying things like, "Wow, I've never heard someone sharpen a pencil that loud."

Disaster #3: The bus ride home.

I dropped my backpack while getting on, and everything — notebooks, pencils, some mystery homework I hadn't done — exploded across the aisle. People had to step over my stuff like it was a crime scene.

The bus driver said, "come on, kid, we haven't got all day."

When I finally slumped into my seat, I knew one thing for certain:

My life was not just going downhill.

It was rolling fast, like someone shoved it.

Chapter 5 - Rock Bottom Arrives Early

Friday

Most people don't reach rock bottom until they're forty and realizing they don't actually know how taxes work.

I reached it in sixth grade.

It started during morning announcements. Our principal, Mr. Bradley, reads the daily updates like he's auditioning for a game show he won't get hired for.

But today, he said:

"Also, congratulations to the selected students whose heritage projects will be displayed at the district showcase!"

And guess whose name was absolutely not on that list?

Yep.

Evan Turner: officially the only kid whose project was so bad that it didn't even count as a project.

When I walked into the hallway afterward, I saw the posters lined up outside the office—glossy photos, fancy handwriting, gold borders.

Then there was the spot where mine *should* have been.

An empty space.

Just a wall.

Mocking me.

On the bus ride home, I stared out the window thinking, *This is it. This is the worst things could possibly get.*

Of course, I didn't know yet that things were going to change.

But not on their own.

Something had to happen first.

Something big.

And it all started the next week.

Chapter 6 - The Weekend Nobody Talks About

Saturday

After the week I had, you'd think the weekend would magically fix everything. You know, sleep in, eat cereal, pretend school doesn't exist. But it didn't fix anything. It just gave me extra time to think about how much of a disaster my life had become.

I woke up late, wandered into the kitchen, and poured myself a bowl of cereal. I took one bite and realized we were out of milk. completely out. So I had to eat dry cereal like some kind of desperate survivalist. That's when my dad walked in and said, "Rough week, huh?" I didn't even have the energy to answer. I just nodded and crunched sadly.

I kept replaying everything in my head: the terrible presentation, the gym class humiliation, the science volcano, the bus disaster. It felt like each memory was trying out for the role of "Worst Moment of Evan's Life." And the worst part? There were too many good candidates.

I tried distracting myself by playing video games, but even that didn't help. I kept losing levels I used to beat easily. My character fell off cliffs. Enemies punched me into next week. At one point, the game literally asked, "Do you want to switch to Easy Mode?" which felt like an insult personally addressed to me.

Around noon, I finally dragged myself to my room and tried cleaning it, which is how you KNOW I was desperate. I found three missing socks, two unfinished homework assignments, and a sandwich I apparently forgot to eat on Tuesday. I threw it away before it gained consciousness.

Sunday

Sunday is usually my "pretend I'm fine" day, but this one didn't go as planned. My mom kept poking her head into my room asking if I needed help with anything. "Anything at all?" she said about twelve times. I think she was waiting for me to suddenly start crying or confess something dramatic like I joined a secret middle-school crime ring.

I tried reading a book for English class, but my brain kept drifting off, and by page four I realized I had no idea who any of the characters were or why one of them was yelling about raisins. So much for homework.

In the afternoon, Noah texted me:

You good? Want to play online later?

I stared at the message for a long time. Normally I'd say yes instantly, but I didn't feel like pretending to be my normal self. I typed, *Maybe tomorrow*, then deleted it. Then typed, *Idk*, then deleted that too. Finally I just sent, *Busy today* and tossed my phone across the room like it offended me personally.

Later, Riley sent me a picture of her cat wearing a hat shaped like a waffle. Under normal circumstances, that would've made me laugh for at least five minutes. Today it just made me feel guilty, like everyone else was trying to cheer me up and I wasn't doing my part.

By Sunday night, I was lying on my bed staring at the ceiling, thinking about how fast everything had fallen apart. A month ago, I wasn't the most popular kid or anything, but I was doing fine. I didn't feel like a disaster. But now it felt like every part of my life had been dropped, stepped on, and then maybe run over by a tractor.

I wasn't sure how to fix anything. I wasn't even sure where to start.

But somewhere inside all the stress and guilt and crushed cereal, a tiny idea started forming. Not a full plan, not even close, but something like a spark.

I wasn't ready to deal with it yet. But I knew I couldn't keep dragging myself around like a zombie forever.

Monday was coming. And whether I wanted it to or not, it was going to give me another chance.

I just hoped I wouldn't mess it up.

Chapter 7 — Monday: A Strange Kind of Hope

Monday

The first Monday after the whole Heritage Project disaster should've felt like a fresh start, but I still woke up with that sinking feeling in my stomach. Not the "I forgot to set my alarm" type but the "something is still wrong with my entire life" type. Still, for the first time in a while, I didn't feel completely hopeless. I wasn't confident, exactly, but I didn't feel like the world was actively trying to crush me either. I guess that counted as progress.

When I got to school, everything sounded normal again—people slamming lockers, arguing about weird stuff, and sprinting to beat the bell like it was the Olympics. I walked to my locker expecting another avalanche, but when I opened it, only one worksheet and a pencil fell out. Only one. compared to last week, that practically felt like a miracle.

Riley came up beside me. "Hey," she said. "You look less… doomed today."

"That's me," I said. "captain Not-Doomed."

She actually smiled, a real smile, not a pity one. "Want to sit with us at lunch?"

I didn't realize how much I missed hearing that. For weeks, I'd felt like an outsider at my own table. "Yeah," I said. "Definitely."

Noah showed up behind her, tossing an orange in the air like he was trying out for the worst juggling act ever. "Dude," he said, "we're redoing the science lab today. Maybe you can cause another chemical meltdown."

"I didn't cause a meltdown," I said. "It was controlled chaos."

"Sure," he said.

The three of us walked to class together. And for once, I felt like I wasn't on the outside looking in anymore. It wasn't perfect, but it felt normal. And normal felt pretty great.

Second period was the redo lab. I followed every direction like the universe was grading me personally. I measured slowly, poured slowly, barely breathed near the beakers. And somehow, everything worked. No foam volcano, no weird smoke, no Ms. Linda whispering "why me" under her breath. She came over, checked my work, and said, "Much better, Evan." I almost fainted from pure relief.

By lunch, I felt brave enough to get in line without worrying I'd drop my tray or spill pasta sauce on someone important. Riley and Noah were already at the table when I sat down. Nobody stared at me. Nobody whispered. Nobody asked if I needed counseling or a nap. It just felt like… lunch. Plain, simple lunch. And that tiny bit of normal was enough to make me feel like maybe things were finally changing.

Of course, that's when Mason Hill walked by. He stopped beside our table and looked at me for a second like he was inspecting a science experiment that wasn't behaving the way he expected.

"You're looking better," he said. "What happened? Your brain finally reboot?"

Normally, that would've bothered me. But today, for some reason, it didn't. I just smiled at him. "Nope," I said. "Just hit the bottom. Now I'm bouncing."

He blinked like he didn't know what to do with that answer, then walked off. And for once, I didn't care what was going through his perfectly combed head.

After school, when I got home, I grabbed a notebook from my desk and wrote something at the top of a blank page:

THE COMEBACK PLAN.

I had no idea what the plan actually was yet. But I knew I wasn't staying down. Not anymore.

And I had absolutely no clue that things were about to take a turn I never saw coming.

Chapter 8 - The Unexpected Twist

Monday

Monday started like any other Monday, which in my life recently meant "prepare for minor humiliation." I was expecting the usual: awkward glances, small disasters, maybe a spilled drink or two. But something strange happened. Nothing bad happened. Not immediately, anyway.

I walked into school and even Mason Hill didn't smirk at me right away. He gave me a sideways glance, like he was trying to figure out if I'd actually changed or if the universe was just playing a cruel joke. For some reason, that felt··· good.

First period was English, and Mrs. Taylor started the class by announcing a surprise quiz. My first thought was panic. My second thought was: wait, maybe this is a chance to prove I'm not a total disaster. I scribbled down answers faster than usual, and somehow I finished before anyone else. Even better, I think I got most of them right.

By lunch, I felt like the week might actually turn around. Riley and Noah saved me a spot at the table, and for the first time in days, I could actually eat my food without thinking, "How is this going to end badly?"

Then came the twist.

Trevor, my least favorite partner from English last week, plopped down across from me with a grin that made me nervous. "Hey, Turner," he said. "You coming to the science club meeting after school? We could use a guy like you."

I froze. Me? Science club? After the foamy volcano incident, I figured I'd been blacklisted for life.

Riley leaned over. "Do it," she whispered. "You might actually like it."

I wanted to say no. I wanted to hide under the table. But something in me, some tiny spark that had started over the weekend, made me nod. "Sure," I said. "Why not?"

After school, I went to the science lab and was surprised to find that everyone there was nice. Not the "smile while secretly judging you" kind of nice, but the real kind. They actually wanted to include me, which was… weirdly amazing.

We worked on a project about building small robots that could navigate a maze. I was actually good at it. I didn't blow anything up. My robot even made it to the end of the maze on the first try, and for a moment, I felt like the same kid I had been before everything fell apart.

By the time I walked home, I felt something I hadn't felt in a while: hope. Not just "maybe tomorrow won't be horrible" hope, but the kind that made you think maybe things could actually get better if you tried.

And I knew that this was only the beginning.

Because if a kid who couldn't handle a beaker of chemicals could start over, maybe Evan Turner could start over too.

Chapter 9 - Making a Comeback (Sort Of)

Tuesday

I didn't expect that Monday would go as well as it did, and I definitely didn't expect Tuesday to get even better. Somehow, the world was giving me tiny little victories instead of disasters, and I didn't know whether to celebrate or be suspicious.

First, Riley and Noah actually invited me to sit with them *before* I got to the table. Normally, I had to hunt them down like a lost puppy. Today, I walked into the cafeteria and there they were, waving me over like I hadn't just spent a week being a walking catastrophe.

At our table, we started talking about the upcoming science fair. I mentioned my little robot that had successfully navigated a maze the day before, and Riley practically cheered like I'd just invented a new kind of rocket. Noah asked a million questions about how I made it work, and I realized that for the first time in weeks, I felt… respected.

Then came the moment that really cemented my comeback: Mason Hill walked past. Normally, I'd brace for a smirk, an elbow jab, or some kind of subtle judgment. But today, he didn't even glance at me. And honestly? That felt better than a gold star.

Second period was math, which normally makes me want to hide under my desk. But somehow, I actually understood what we were learning. I didn't just get the answers right; I felt *proud* of my brain for working properly for once. I didn't tell anyone, because bragging is risky business in middle school, but inside I was doing a little victory dance.

By lunch, my confidence had grown enough that I actually laughed at a joke I told Riley and Noah. Not a nervous laugh, not the kind that makes people roll their eyes. A real laugh. And for some reason, that made me feel like myself again. The old Evan Turner wasn't completely gone—he was just buried under a week of disaster. And now he was digging his way back out.

After school, I went back to the science lab to continue working on my robot. This time, we added tiny sensors that could detect walls and adjust the robot's path automatically. I was terrible at wiring, but Trevor helped without making me feel like an idiot. The project actually looked impressive by the time we finished, and Ms. Linda gave me a nod that practically said, "Not bad, Turner. Not bad at all."

When I walked home, I felt a strange mix of exhaustion and pride. For the first time in a long time, I felt like maybe things were turning around. I didn't know how far I'd come, or whether I'd be able to stay on track, but I did know one thing: I wasn't a disaster kid anymore. At least, not completely.

And that night, I added a new line to my "COMEBACK PLAN" notebook:

Step 1: Survive the week without embarrassment.
Step 2: Keep making small wins.
Step 3: Prove to myself I'm not a walking disaster.

It was a simple plan, but sometimes simple plans are the best kind.

Chapter 10 - Small Wins, Big Smiles

Wednesday

I didn't expect today to be anything special. Honestly, I was just hoping to survive without tripping in the hallway or accidentally insulting someone's pet. But for the first time in a long time, things started going my way.

First period was history, which usually makes me want to hide under a desk and hope the teacher forgets I exist. But today, Mrs. Lopez actually called on me to answer a question about the American Revolution. Normally, I'd freeze like a statue, but somehow the answer popped out perfectly. She smiled and said, "Exactly right, Evan!" I almost fell out of my chair from surprise. I didn't know whether to thank her or pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

At lunch, Riley and Noah were waiting at our usual table, and they weren't just smiling politely—they were genuinely excited to see me. Noah showed me a comic he'd drawn, and Riley told me about a funny thing that happened in her art class. I laughed at both of them like a normal person, without worrying about looking awkward. It felt… good.

During gym, I didn't embarrass myself for the first time in weeks. We were playing basketball, and I actually managed to make a few passes that didn't result in someone getting hit in the face. Even better, I scored a basket. No one laughed. Some kids even clapped. I didn't know how to feel, so I smiled like a maniac the rest of class.

After school, I went to the science lab to work on my robot again. Trevor was there, but this time he wasn't making sarcastic comments. He actually asked for my help figuring out the sensors. I realized that not only was I contributing, I was kind of… good at this. For the first time, I felt like maybe I belonged somewhere outside of the cafeteria.

By the time I walked home, I was exhausted but happy. The week was barely halfway over, but it already felt like a turning point. Small wins, I reminded myself. That's how comebacks start.

That night, I added a new step to my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 4: Keep collecting small wins. They add up faster than you think.

It was simple, but it made me feel like I had control again. And control, in middle school, is worth more than gold.

Chapter 11 - Risky Business

Thursday

By Thursday, I was starting to feel like maybe my comeback wasn't a fluke. Small wins had stacked up, and even Mason Hill hadn't given me that "I told you so" look all day. It felt weird, like I was walking through middle school with an invisible shield. But the shield wasn't going to hold forever if I didn't take some risks.

First period was English again. Mrs. Taylor asked us to do a short impromptu speech in front of the class. Normally, I would have panicked and muttered something about my cat or a random video game. But this time, I raised my hand and volunteered.

I took a deep breath and started talking about my favorite book series. My voice shook a little at first, but then I saw Riley and Noah nodding, and I remembered that I had survived worse than a couple of sweaty glances from classmates. By the end, a few kids even clapped. I felt like I had just climbed a tiny mountain without tripping.

Lunch wasn't as simple as last time. Trevor, the guy I'd worked with on the robot, plopped down at our table uninvited. I braced for sarcasm or some weird insult, but instead, he just smiled and started talking about his robot ideas. I realized that this was a risk I hadn't expected: letting someone new into my little friend group. But it didn't feel dangerous—it felt like progress.

Gym was the usual chaos, but this time I volunteered to be team captain. I figured if I was going to rebuild my reputation, I needed to step up, not hide. Surprisingly, it went well. I even managed to keep our team organized long enough to win the game. Winning isn't everything, but in middle school, it counts.

After school, I stayed a little longer in the science lab. This time, I took the lead on designing a new robot attachment that could pick up small objects. I wasn't sure it would work, but I tried anyway. When it actually succeeded on the first attempt, Trevor high-fived me so hard I almost fell over.

I walked home that afternoon with my backpack bouncing on my shoulders and a grin I couldn't shake. Taking risks was scary, but the payoff was worth it. And for the first time in weeks, I felt like I was in charge of my own story again.

That night, I wrote in my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 5: Take risks. They might be scary, but they're worth it.

I didn't know what the next day would bring, but I was ready to find out.

Chapter 12 - The Big Misunderstanding

Friday

I thought my comeback week was going perfectly. I had survived gym, aced my impromptu speech, and even managed to lead my team without falling on my face. I was starting to feel like maybe middle school wasn't a total disaster after all.

Then lunchtime happened.

I was sitting with Riley, Noah, and Trevor, eating my sandwich and talking about the science fair, when I noticed Mason Hill across the cafeteria staring at us. At first, I ignored him. Then he whispered something to one of his friends, and suddenly I heard laughter. I tried to shrug it off, but before I knew it, Trevor leaned over and said, "Uh... Evan? I think they think you're bragging about last week's robot thing."

Bragging? Me? I had said exactly zero words about my robot at school this week. I wasn't proud, I was just... existing. But somehow, the rumor had started that I was boasting about being good at science now.

I tried to explain, but before I could, Mason's group started walking by, and one of them called out, "Hey, look at Mr. Big Brain over here!"

I froze. My face got hot. Riley tried to defend me, saying, "He's not bragging!" But the damage was done. Some kids snickered, and suddenly I felt like I was back at square one.

After lunch, I hid in the library, flipping through a book I didn't even like, just to avoid anyone noticing I was spiraling. Noah came in and sat across from me. "Don't worry about it," he said. "People will forget. You're still awesome."

I wanted to believe him, but middle school logic is tricky. If a rumor starts, it spreads faster than any virus your mom ever warned you about. And it seemed like this one was contagious.

Science lab after school was my only saving grace. Trevor and I worked quietly, building a second robot and carefully testing sensors. For a little while, I forgot about the cafeteria. I even managed to laugh when Trevor's robot knocked over a stack of books.

Walking home, I realized something important: setbacks were going to happen, no matter how careful I was. But if I let them define me, I'd never get anywhere. I had to keep pushing forward, even if it meant looking ridiculous along the way.

That night, I added a new step to my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 6: Rumors happen. Don't let them stop you.

It wasn't going to be easy, but I felt ready. I didn't know how the week would end, but I knew I was still moving in the right direction.

Chapter 13 - The Science Fair Challenge

Monday

The weekend had gone by fast, which is never a good thing when you're trying to recover from middle school chaos. Somehow, in the middle of all the small wins, the science fair had been scheduled for this week. I had been quietly building my robot with Trevor, thinking I could avoid attention until the day of the fair. But apparently, "quiet" wasn't going to happen.

First period, Mrs. Linda announced that we'd be presenting a short preview of our projects to the class before the big fair. She looked at me with that same slightly terrifying smile that says, *I hope you don't mess this up.*

My stomach sank. I liked robots, but standing up in front of the class and explaining what it did? That sounded like a disaster waiting to happen.

At lunch, Riley and Noah tried to reassure me. "You'll do fine," Riley said. "You're good at this now. Just··· don't overthink it."

Easier said than done. My mind was already imagining a thousand ways this could go wrong. The robot could fall apart. It could explode. Trevor could trip over a wire. Or worse, Mason Hill could show up with some new joke that ruins everything.

By second period, I was sweating just thinking about it. Science lab felt like the calmest place on Earth, and even there, my robot beeped at me in a way that sounded judgmental. Trevor patted me on the shoulder. "Don't worry, it's ready," he said. "Just explain what it does, and it'll impress everyone."

Presentation time came faster than I expected. I set up my robot in front of the class, and for a moment, I froze. I could see Mason Hill smirking from the back, ready to catch me if I messed up. I took a deep breath, started talking about how the robot could navigate a maze using sensors, and··· it actually worked. The robot moved across the table exactly as planned, avoiding obstacles and stopping at the finish line.

The class gasped. Some kids clapped. I felt like I had done something impossible. Even Mason Hill didn't say anything.

After class, Riley and Noah both came up to me. "See? You didn't even freak out!" Riley said.

"I was kind of freaking out," I admitted, "but it went okay."

By the end of the day, I realized something important: this was the first big win that wasn't just luck. It wasn't a small victory or a moment where people didn't notice me. I had worked for this, and it had paid off.

That night, I wrote in my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 7: Big challenges are scary, but you can handle them.

I didn't know what the rest of the week would bring, but I felt ready. For the first time in weeks, I felt like maybe my comeback wasn't just a fluke.

Chapter 14 - Friends, Frenemies, and Forging Ahead

Tuesday

After the mini-science fair preview, I felt like I could breathe again. Not completely, of course—middle school doesn't really allow that—but for the first time in weeks, I didn't feel like I was walking through the halls as a disaster magnet.

Riley and Noah were thrilled about my robot. Riley actually suggested we start a "robot club," which made me laugh, because the last time I'd laughed like that without hiding under a blanket was… well, a very long time ago.

Then came the tricky part: dealing with people who didn't exactly want me to succeed. Mason Hill, naturally, had been lurking nearby when the science fair was mentioned. He approached during lunch, pretending to be casual. "Hey, Turner," he said, "that robot thing you did? Not bad for once."

I stared at him. Was he genuinely complimenting me? Was this a trap? My brain hurt just thinking about it.

"I mean, it's… okay," I said cautiously.

Mason smirked, but it didn't feel as threatening as usual. Maybe he had realized that I was actually… improving.

After lunch, Riley, Noah, and I went to the library to brainstorm ideas for the actual science fair. It was kind of amazing—working on something together without anyone judging or making fun of me. For the first time in weeks, I felt like I had a place where I could be myself and still succeed.

Later that day, gym class happened. Normally, gym is where my bad luck shows up in dramatic fashion. But this time, I decided to be brave. I volunteered to be team captain again, and this time I actually gave instructions that made sense. My team won the game, and no one laughed at me. It felt like my confidence was finally catching up with reality.

Walking home, I realized something important. Life wasn't magically perfect, and I was still going to have embarrassing moments, rumors, and small disasters. But for the first time in a long time, I felt like I could handle them. I had friends, I had skills, and most importantly, I had momentum.

That night, I added a new step to my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 8: Keep building momentum. It makes the scary stuff easier.

And with that, I felt ready to face whatever the rest of the week threw at me—even if it included Mason Hill, more gym chaos, or some unexpected plot twist that only middle school could deliver.

Chapter 15 - The Lunchroom Dilemma

Wednesday

I thought I was finally in the clear. My robot was working, my confidence was growing, and even Mason Hill seemed to have… I don't know, grudging respect? Maybe. Probably not, but I was allowed to imagine it.

Then lunchtime hit.

I walked into the cafeteria, tray in hand, ready to sit with Riley and Noah, when I noticed something unusual. The usual chaos was there—kids screaming about who got the last slice of pizza, someone dropped their backpack in the hallway—but there was a group of kids looking right at me.

And whispering.

Great. Just great.

I tried to ignore it and made my way to the table. Riley waved me over, and Noah gave me a thumbs-up. But before I could sit down, Trevor, who had just finished a mini science experiment in the hallway (because of course), shouted, "Hey, Evan! Watch out for the… uh…" He trailed off, pointing behind me.

I turned and saw Mason Hill, standing there with a huge sandwich in one hand and a suspicious grin on his face. Before I could react, he tripped over someone's backpack and—smash—sandwich flew right into the air. I ducked instinctively, but the sandwich somehow landed on my tray.

Silence.

Then everyone in the cafeteria started laughing.

I froze. My comeback week, my tiny victories… all of it seemed to hang in the balance, teetering on this flying ham-and-cheese disaster.

But then something surprising happened. Riley and Noah didn't laugh. They just shrugged, grabbed their food, and started eating. Trevor helped me scoop my sandwich back onto the tray. And slowly, I realized I had a choice: get embarrassed, storm off, or just… deal with it.

I chose deal with it.

I smiled. "Well, that's one way to spice up lunch," I said, trying to sound casual.

To my surprise, a few other kids even chuckled. Mason Hill looked sheepish, muttered something about "clumsy," and walked away.

It wasn't perfect. I was still mortified. But I survived. And for the first time, I realized that surviving might be just as important as winning.

That night, I added a new step to my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 9: Survive the ridiculous moments. They happen to everyone.

I didn't know what the rest of the week would bring, but I felt ready. After all, if I could handle flying sandwiches and Mason Hill in the same lunch period, I could probably handle anything middle school threw at me next.

Chapter 16 - The Group Project Gauntlet

Thursday

I thought surviving flying sandwiches at lunch meant my week couldn't get any more stressful. I was wrong.

Mrs. Taylor announced a group project in English. Normally, group projects are just a fancy way of guaranteeing disaster. And the worst part? I got stuck with··· Mason Hill.

I wanted to argue, cry, or run, but instead I just muttered, "Sure··· sounds fun," and sat down. Riley and Noah looked horrified from across the room. "Good luck," Noah whispered. "You're gonna need it."

Mason Hill leaned back, grinning. "Don't worry, Turner. I won't make it too hard··· probably."

We had to come up with a short skit about a historical event. I tried to suggest something simple, like "George Washington crossing the Delaware." But Mason immediately wanted to turn it into an elaborate spy thriller version, complete with dramatic sound effects and interpretive dance.

I froze. Interpretive dance? Seriously?

We started arguing. He wanted spies. I wanted history. Riley's whispered "just compromise" advice went completely ignored. Finally, we decided on a mix: historical spies crossing the Delaware. Somehow, it sounded worse when spoken aloud.

During rehearsals, Mason tried to take control, naturally. But instead of panicking, I did something new: I stood up and said, "wait, we can combine both ideas without it being ridiculous." I explained my version slowly. To my surprise, he listened. Not perfectly, but enough.

By presentation day, the skit wasn't perfect. The "spy" part still involved me ducking behind desks like a secret agent while Mason dramatically narrated. But it worked. People laughed in the right places. I even got a nod from Mrs. Taylor.

Afterward, I realized something important: I could stand up for myself without starting a full-blown disaster. Mason Hill wasn't easy to work with, but I managed. I wasn't perfect, but I survived—and even got some genuine laughs.

Walking home, I felt like my confidence was growing again. Not the kind that makes you think you're invincible, but the kind that reminds you that small wins and clever thinking matter.

That night, I updated my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 10: Stand up for yourself, even when the challenge seems impossible.

Middle school is a weird place, but for the first time, I felt like I could navigate it without tripping over every obstacle in sight. I didn't know what next week would bring, but at least I knew I could handle it.

Chapter 17 - The Awkward Hero Moment

Friday

By Friday, I was starting to feel like I might actually survive middle school without a total meltdown. My robot was still working, my group project with Mason Hill had been a mild success, and lunch hadn't included any flying sandwiches. Life was··· manageable.

Until gym class.

We were playing dodgeball, which is basically a sport designed to humiliate every single kid in the school at least once a week. I had been doing okay, dodging balls and even catching one or two. Then, out of nowhere, a rogue ball came flying toward Riley. Without thinking, I jumped in front of her and caught it.

The whole gym went quiet. Then someone—probably Noah—shouted, "Whoa! Hero move!"

I froze. Hero? Really? I was just trying not to get hit. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized: maybe this was my moment. Maybe I wasn't just surviving—I was actually doing something right.

The next ball came, and I caught that too. And then another. Before I knew it, I had somehow become the "dodgeball hero" of the day. Kids were cheering, and even Mason Hill gave me a nod. A nod.

After class, Riley high-fived me and said, "You were awesome!" Noah grinned and added, "Yeah, who knew Turner had skills?"

I walked home with a goofy smile plastered on my face. This was one of those rare days where I felt like the old me and the new me had merged. I wasn't perfect, but I was starting to feel proud of myself again.

That night, I wrote in my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 11: Sometimes, you just have to act without thinking. Hero moments happen by accident.

I didn't know if the weekend would be calm or chaotic, but I had a feeling that middle school wasn't done testing me yet—and I was starting to enjoy the challenge.

Chapter 18 - The Unexpected Assignment

Monday

Mondays should come with a warning label: "caution: May cause extreme stress and awkwardness." I thought my last week had prepared me, but apparently, the universe had other plans.

First period, Mrs. Taylor dropped a bomb. "We're starting a new assignment today," she announced, "and it's going to count for a big part of your grade."

My stomach dropped. Big assignments? That's a phrase middle school uses to terrify kids.

Then she added, "You will work in groups of four, and you'll create a short presentation about the Industrial Revolution... with a twist. You have to include a skit and a visual aid."

I blinked. Skit AND visual aid? My brain registered that as a double catastrophe.

Riley shot me a look that said, *we'll survive this together.* Noah whispered, *At least it's not dodgeball again.*

When we got assigned groups, my heart sank. Mason Hill. Of course. Along with two other kids I didn't know—Sarah, who looked like she already had a thousand ideas ready, and Ben, who seemed to think he was running for class president.

I opened my notebook and tried to jot down ideas, but Mason immediately jumped in. "We should make it like a movie trailer for the Industrial Revolution," he said, waving his hands like he was Spielberg.

I raised an eyebrow. "Or... maybe we could just show the actual inventions and explain why they mattered?"

Mason rolled his eyes. "Boring."

Sarah and Ben both started suggesting extras: costumes, props, even a fog machine. I felt my face turn red. How was I supposed to survive this without tripping over some crazy idea?

Recess came, and I decided to sneak to the library to regroup. Riley found me, holding a book upside down. "Trying to plan the presentation without exploding?" she asked. I nodded.

"You just have to focus on what works for all of you," she said. "Small wins, remember?"

I sighed. She was right. Instead of worrying about fog machines or dramatic reenactments, maybe I could focus on something that would actually make sense.

After school, we met at my house to work on the project. Mason immediately pulled out a storyboard, Sarah had costumes ready, and Ben had already labeled pieces of cardboard. I felt like a deer in headlights.

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath, "maybe we combine your ideas··· but focus on one invention per person. That way we don't completely crash and burn."

Trevor's voice (I had roped him in as my unofficial consultant) chimed in over text, "Smart. Less chaos = better chance of success."

By the time we left, I had actually contributed something useful. The twist? Everyone agreed with me. Mason didn't even groan. I had survived group project planning with my dignity mostly intact.

That night, I updated my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 12: Focus on what you can control. Big chaos looks scary, but small contributions matter.

I had no idea what the rest of the week would bring, but I felt··· ready. Not invincible, but ready. And somehow, that felt like progress.

Chapter 19 - The Chaos of Collaboration

Tuesday

I should've known that surviving group projects was only the first step. Today was when the chaos really kicked in.

We met in the library after school to start putting our presentation together. Mason Hill immediately grabbed a pile of colored markers and announced he was "designing the ultimate storyboard." Sarah pulled out costumes, which looked suspiciously like they came from her older brother's Halloween stash. Ben had labeled every piece of cardboard with glitter glue. And me? I was holding a stack of index cards, wondering how many ways I could politely die from embarrassment without actually leaving the library.

"Okay, team," Mason said, "we need to assign roles. I'll narrate. Sarah, you act. Ben, visuals. Turner, you…" He paused, looking at me as if I was a new species. "…support."

Support? Support?! I felt a mix of fury and panic, but I remembered my COMEBACK PLAN: Step 12—focus on what you can control.

"Actually," I said carefully, "I think I could explain one of the inventions myself. That way, we don't have to rely on narration alone."

Mason groaned but surprisingly didn't argue. "Fine. One invention. But don't mess it up."

We started rehearsing. The first disaster happened almost immediately. Sarah tried to put on a top hat for her character, tripped on the table, and almost knocked over the globe. Ben tried to stop her and instead sent a pile of papers flying across the floor. Mason, narrating, laughed so hard he forgot his lines.

I froze. The moment was perfect for a total meltdown. But instead of panicking, I jumped in and improvised my lines while picking up the scattered props. Somehow, the invention explanation actually made sense.

"That's surprisingly coherent," Mason muttered. I couldn't tell if it was praise or horror that I survived.

Rehearsal continued, each attempt more chaotic than the last. Costumes got tangled. Props broke. Ben spilled glitter glue on my hands. But with every small recovery—explaining an invention, keeping a costume from falling apart, improvising a missing prop—I realized something: I was handling it. I wasn't perfect, but I was leading in my own way.

By the end of the session, the library looked like a disaster zone, but our skit was… almost ready. The robot from last week even made a cameo as a factory helper, and surprisingly, no one mocked it.

Walking home, my backpack heavier from all the leftover props, I felt proud. It had been a chaotic, exhausting, ridiculous day, but I had survived—and contributed in a meaningful way.

That night, I wrote in my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 13: Chaos happens. Don't panic—just handle what you can.

I didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but somehow, I was starting to enjoy the challenge. After weeks of disasters, I could finally see a path forward, and it didn't feel impossible anymore.

Chapter 20 - The First Test

Wednesday

Today was the day we gave a mini presentation of our group project to the class. I wasn't nervous in the usual stomach-turning way—I was more nervous in the "what disaster will strike this time?" way. After last night's chaotic rehearsal, I knew anything could happen.

When it was our turn, we dragged the props, costumes, and my robot into the front of the classroom. Mason immediately started narrating, Sarah put on her top hat and waved dramatically, Ben pointed to the cardboard labels, and I tried to look calm while clutching my index cards like a lifeline.

The first few lines went fine. The robot, in its tiny cameo role as a factory helper, rolled across the table exactly as planned. I even managed my explanation of one invention without stumbling once. A small victory.

Then came the disaster.

Sarah, acting out her character, tripped over the table edge (again), knocking over the globe and sending it rolling across the floor. Mason, trying to save his narration, flailed so wildly he knocked over a stack of books. And Ben, in a panic, accidentally sprayed glitter glue onto the front of his shirt—and mine.

The whole class erupted into laughter. My heart sank. I wanted to crawl under the table.

But then something amazing happened.

I took a deep breath, ignored the chaos, and kept going. I improvised, explaining the next invention while maneuvering around flying props. Mason started laughing at himself instead of me. Sarah apologized and got back into character. Even Ben managed to wipe the glitter off his shirt without crying.

By the end of the skit, somehow, it worked. The inventions were explained, the robot rolled across the finish line, and our group got applause instead of groans. Mason even whispered, "Not bad, Turner."

Walking back to my desk, I felt this strange, warm sensation: pride. Not just the "I didn't mess up" pride, but real pride that I had stayed calm, led when necessary, and kept things moving.

At lunch, Riley and Noah celebrated with me. "You handled that like a pro," Riley said. "I can't believe Mason said something nice."

"Yeah," Noah added. "It's official—you're turning into a middle school legend... sort of."

I grinned. Sort of a legend sounded perfect. I wasn't invincible, I wasn't perfect, and disasters would probably keep happening. But I was learning to survive them—and even win sometimes.

That night, I updated my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 14: When disaster strikes, stay calm. Surviving chaos is a victory in itself.

As I closed my notebook, I realized something important: middle school wasn't about being perfect. It was about recovering, improvising, and laughing at the ridiculousness along the way. And for the first time in a long time, I felt like I could do just that.

Chapter 21 - The Midpoint Crisis

Thursday

I should have known that life couldn't let me coast for too long. After surviving the mini presentation disaster-turned-success, I felt like I was finally getting the hang of middle school. But apparently, the universe had bigger plans for me.

It started during lunch. I was walking to our usual table with Riley and Noah when I noticed a crowd gathering near the lockers. Mason Hill was there, smirking. I thought maybe it was nothing—until I heard my name.

"Hey, look! Turner thinks he's some kind of hero now!" Mason called.

My stomach sank. Hero? From dodgeball? He was mocking me. And worse, it wasn't just him. A bunch of kids around him were laughing. I felt my face heat up.

I tried to ignore it and sit down, but then Riley whispered, "Evan... I think they're talking about the project too. Some people think you're showing off."

Showing off? I didn't even bring it up! Somehow, my successes—the robot, the skit, surviving chaos—were now being twisted into proof that I was bragging.

I wanted to disappear. I wanted to crawl under the table and stay there forever.

Second period didn't help. Math was... well, math. I was usually okay, but today my brain refused to cooperate. Every problem felt like a trap, and I could practically hear Mason's imaginary laughter in my head.

By lunch, the rumor had spread further. Even Trevor, who normally had a sarcastic comment for everything, asked cautiously, "Uh... people are talking."

I realized something important: the comeback I'd been building could collapse in a single day. Weeks of progress, small victories, moments of pride—they all felt at risk.

After school, I went to the library to hide, but Riley and Noah followed. "Evan," Riley said, "you can't let this get to you. People love to gossip, but that doesn't mean it's true. You're still the same person you were last week."

Noah nodded. "And we've seen it. You've been handling everything like a pro. Don't let them take that away from you."

We spent the next hour talking through strategies: ignore the rumors, focus on what I could control, and not let Mason's comments ruin my week. For the first time, I felt like maybe I could handle it—but it was going to be a real test.

That night, I wrote in my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 15: Rumors and teasing are inevitable. Don't let them undo your progress.

As I closed my notebook, I realized the truth: middle school wasn't just about surviving chaos or dodging flying sandwiches. It was about surviving people—and sometimes surviving your own fear of failure. And I wasn't done learning how to do that.

Chapter 22 - The Showdown in History Class

Friday

By Friday, the rumors about me "showing off" had spread faster than a sneeze in a crowded classroom. I tried to ignore it, but even walking into history class felt like stepping onto a battlefield.

Mrs. Lopez was writing something on the board, completely oblivious to my internal panic. I sat down, trying to act normal, but I could feel eyes on me. Whispers. Glances. One kid even nudged his friend and said, "Isn't that the robot guy?"

I gripped my notebook like it was a life raft. I thought about running out the door, but then I remembered something from my COMEBACK PLAN: Step 15—rumors and teasing are inevitable. Don't let them undo your progress.

Then, the moment came.

Mrs. Lopez called on me to answer a question about the Industrial Revolution. Normally, I would have panicked and mumbled something about a random invention, but this time I took a deep breath and spoke clearly.

"The spinning jenny," I said, "was important because it allowed faster textile production and changed the way people worked in factories."

Silence. Then a few kids nodded. Even Mason Hill raised an eyebrow.

Encouraged, I continued, explaining the role of steam engines and other inventions. I didn't brag. I didn't show off. I just shared what I knew. And for the first time in days, I felt like my classmates were seeing me as… me, not some robot-showing, dodgeball-hero, rumor-magnet.

After class, Mason Hill approached me. My stomach twisted. Was this going to be bad?

"Not bad, Turner," he said, almost quietly. "You actually know your stuff."

I blinked. "Thanks?"

He smirked, then walked away. It wasn't a huge victory, but it was something. A small, quiet acknowledgment that maybe I was more than the rumors.

Walking to lunch, Riley and Noah gave me high-fives. "See?" Riley said. "You're not defined by what people say."

Noah added, "You handled it like a pro. I'm proud of you."

By the time I got home, I realized that surviving middle school wasn't about avoiding embarrassment or rumors. It was about standing up, speaking up, and keeping your head high—even when the world seems ready to knock you down.

That night, I updated my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 16: Show your skills without arrogance. Let your actions speak louder than rumors.

I closed my notebook and smiled. The week hadn't been perfect, and challenges were still coming. But for the first time in a long time, I felt like I wasn't just surviving—I was actually growing.

Chapter 23 - The Science Fair Showdown

Monday

Science fair day had arrived. My stomach was doing flips, not because I was nervous about my robot—it had survived everything so far—but because of everything else: the crowds, Mason Hill, and the possibility of another catastrophe.

I arrived at school early to set up my display. Trevor had helped me make a last-minute adjustment to the robot's claw arm so it could pick up tiny objects more smoothly. It was perfect—or as perfect as a middle school robot could be.

As soon as I started arranging my posters, I realized the competition was fierce. Kids had built volcanoes, solar-powered cars, and one even had a robot that could solve a Rubik's cube. I felt a pang of doubt. could my simple maze-navigating robot actually stand out?

Then Mason Hill walked over, smirking. "Wow, Turner," he said. "Your little robot survived the chaos. I'm impressed... for once."

I smiled. "Thanks," I said cautiously.

The judges arrived, and the room fell silent. I explained my robot's design, sensors, and how it could navigate a maze. When I demonstrated it, the robot performed perfectly, stopping at the finish line and lifting a small block.

A few judges nodded. One even said, "That's clever engineering for your age."

Then came the disaster moment—classic middle school timing. The robot's claw snagged one of the posters on the table, ripping it halfway off. My heart sank. But before I could panic, I laughed and held the poster up. "Well," I said, "at least it's testing its strength!"

Some kids laughed. The judges smiled. crisis avoided.

After all the presentations, the awards ceremony began. I didn't expect to win—there were too many amazing projects—but then they called my name. **Third place.**

I couldn't believe it. I had actually placed. Trevor gave me a high-five so hard I nearly fell over. Riley and Noah were cheering. Even Mason Hill nodded.

Walking home, I realized that middle school wasn't just about surviving disasters. It was about persistence, creativity, and laughing at the ridiculous moments along the way.

That night, I wrote in my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 17: Prepare, perform, and persevere. Even small victories matter.

I didn't know what challenges were coming next, but for the first time in weeks, I felt like I could actually handle middle school—and maybe even enjoy it.

Chapter 24 - Friendships and Fumbles

Tuesday

After the science fair, life felt… different. Not perfect, not flawless, but somehow lighter. I had survived chaos, rumors, and Mason Hill's constant commentary—and even earned a third-place ribbon for my robot.

Riley, Noah, and I decided to celebrate by meeting at the park after school. We talked, joked, and even tried a makeshift game of "robot tag," where I had to pretend my backpack was a robot chasing them. It was ridiculous, and I laughed until my stomach hurt.

Then came the fumble.

Trevor texted me asking if I could help him with a last-minute robot problem. I ran back to my house, grabbed some tools, and started working in the garage. I was so focused that I didn't notice my little brother sneaking behind me with a water balloon.

Splash.

My robot, my notes, my COMEBACK PLAN notebook—all wet. I froze. The robot still worked, thankfully, but the notebook pages were wrinkled, and the ink smeared.

I wanted to scream, cry, or throw something. But then I remembered: Step 12 and Step 15 of my COMEBACK PLAN—focus on what you can control, and don't let disaster undo your progress.

I dried the robot, salvaged the notebook pages, and realized it wasn't the end of the world. Trevor laughed so hard he nearly dropped his own robot, and even my little brother apologized (after a dramatic bow).

By the time we returned to the park, Riley and Noah were waiting. I showed them my wrinkled, smeared notebook. Riley grinned. "Looks like your comeback plan got a water feature upgrade."

Noah laughed. "Yeah, a little chaos keeps it exciting."

Walking home that evening, I realized that part of middle school success wasn't just winning or surviving—it was handling setbacks, laughing at the mess, and relying on friends. Even messy moments could turn into something memorable.

That night, I updated my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 18: Chaos and mistakes happen. Laugh, adapt, and keep moving forward.

I didn't know what the next week would bring, but for the first time in weeks, I felt like I had a rhythm—a way to survive, grow, and even enjoy middle school along the way.

Chapter 25 - The Unexpected Challenge

Wednesday

Middle school has a way of sneaking challenges up on you when you least expect them. I thought the science fair, rumors, and dodgeball hero moments were enough chaos for one week, but apparently, my brain—or maybe the universe—had other plans.

It started in math class. Mrs. Jenkins announced a pop quiz. Not a regular quiz, but one where we had to solve a combination of algebra and word problems under a strict time limit.

My stomach sank. I usually did okay in math, but the words "pop quiz" might as well have been a horror movie soundtrack.

I glanced around the room. Riley was focused and calm. Noah looked nervous but determined. Mason Hill smirked like he already knew the answers. Great. Just great.

The quiz began. I read the first problem: "If a factory produces 120 widgets per hour and operates for 8 hours, how many widgets are produced in total?"

Easy. I scribbled 960 on my paper. First victory.

Then came the second problem: a word problem about train schedules that somehow included algebraic fractions, a diagram of a bridge, and a random squirrel for some reason. I froze. My pencil hovered, shaking.

I remembered my COMEBACK PLAN: Step 12—focus on what you can control. I broke the problem into parts, ignoring the squirrel, and slowly solved it step by step.

By the end of the quiz, I wasn't perfect. But I had answers for every question, and they weren't terrible.

After class, Riley nudged me. "See? You stayed calm. That's huge."

Noah added, "Yeah, and Mason Hill didn't even make fun of you this time."

I smiled. Maybe I was actually getting the hang of this middle school thing. Not perfect, not invincible, but capable.

The next challenge came during lunch. Mason Hill tried to pull another "trick" by setting up a rumor about my quiz performance. But this time, I didn't panic. I laughed it off, made a joke, and even managed to turn a few heads in my favor.

Walking home that afternoon, I realized a pattern: middle school wasn't about avoiding challenges—it was about facing them, surviving, and learning from them. The small victories, the controlled chaos, the moments where I didn't let fear take over—they were all building something stronger.

That night, I updated my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 19: Face challenges head-on. Stay calm, stay focused, and don't let fear control you.

I didn't know what the next week would bring, but for the first time in weeks, I felt like I was ready for whatever middle school threw at me—even the ridiculous, the unexpected, and the chaotic.

Chapter 26 - Small Wins, Big Confidence

Thursday

By Thursday, I noticed something strange: I was starting to enjoy middle school. Not the cafeteria chaos or dodgeball disasters, but the feeling of actually managing life here. My robot had survived the science fair. I'd handled group projects without crying. I was even laughing at Mason Hill's occasional smirks instead of panicking.

It started with something small during lunch. Riley, Noah, and I were sitting at our usual table when a new kid, Jenna, asked if she could join us. Normally, I would have panicked at meeting someone new—but I smiled, waved her over, and included her in our conversation.

"Wow," Jenna said, "you guys seem… nice. And not scary like everyone else."

I grinned. "Yeah, we're nice. Mostly."

Riley and Noah laughed. I realized that I actually felt comfortable introducing someone new to our little group. That might not sound like much, but for me, it was huge.

Later that day, we had history class. Mrs. Lopez asked questions about the Industrial Revolution again, and for the first time, I didn't even worry about being judged. I answered confidently, explaining the inventions and their impact on society. Kids actually listened—and even Mason Hill nodded in approval.

After class, Riley whispered, "See? You're like… middle school royalty now."

I snorted. "Hardly royalty. Maybe… middle school knight. Defeated dodgeballs, rumors, and chaos. Survived with dignity."

Noah laughed. "Middle school knight. I like it."

The real test came during gym. We were playing volleyball this time, which isn't usually my sport. But I decided to focus on teamwork instead of fearing embarrassment. I passed the ball, cheered when others scored, and even managed to serve a few times without tripping.

By the end of the day, I felt… good. Not perfect, not flawless, but capable. Middle school didn't feel like an endless trap anymore—it felt like a place where I could survive, grow, and even have fun.

That night, I updated my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 20: celebrate small wins. They add up to big confidence.

As I closed my notebook, I realized something important: middle school wouldn't ever be perfect, and challenges would always appear. But if I kept facing them, surviving them, and laughing at the chaos along the way, I could handle almost anything.

Chapter 27 - The Field Trip Fiasco

Friday

I thought I had finally mastered middle school. I had survived group projects, rumors, dodgeball, and even the science fair. I was ready for a calm day—maybe even a normal day. Ha. Middle school doesn't do normal.

Today was the field trip. Our class was going to the local history museum, which sounded boring at first, but Riley and Noah assured me it could be fun. I packed my bag, double-checked my COMEBACK PLAN notebook (just in case), and mentally prepared for whatever chaos awaited.

The bus ride started normally. Kids were joking, throwing paper airplanes, and Mason Hill was attempting to give a "history lecture" in a ridiculously deep voice. Everything seemed fine… until we got off the bus.

The first stop was the old industrial machinery exhibit. I was fascinated, but then a kid in our class decided to challenge me to a "who can lift the heaviest gear" contest. Naturally, the gear was at least twice my size. I tried to politely decline, but he grabbed my arm and plopped the gear in my hands.

cue embarrassment number one.

I struggled to lift it, nearly dropping it on my foot. Laughter erupted from half the class, including Mason Hill. I thought about giving up, running, or hiding behind a machine—but then I remembered Step 12 of my COMEBACK PLAN: focus on what you can control.

I shifted my grip, gritted my teeth, and managed to hold it for at least five seconds before setting it down safely. Small victory, chaotic scene avoided.

Next came the scavenger hunt. Each group had to find clues hidden around the museum. Riley, Noah, and I teamed up. Mason Hill joined our group, of course, claiming he "needed help."

Halfway through, Mason accidentally triggered the old water pump demonstration. Water sprayed everywhere. Some kids screamed. I slipped on the wet floor but managed to grab a display rope, saving a fragile model from catastrophe.

I stood there, dripping wet, looking at Mason. "Really?" I said.

He shrugged. "It's educational chaos. Part of the learning experience."

By the end of the trip, we had found all the clues, saved multiple fragile exhibits, and even managed to get a group photo—though my hair was sticking up like a wet porcupine.

On the bus ride back, Riley laughed. "Only you, Evan, could survive a field trip with style and chaos intact."

Noah added, "And still somehow look heroic."

That night, I wrote in my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 21: Expect chaos everywhere—even field trips. Survival is success.

I realized something important: middle school might be messy, ridiculous, and unpredictable, but surviving—and sometimes thriving—wasn't impossible. It just required focus, humor, and a willingness to face disasters head-on.

Chapter 28 - The Talent Show Turmoil

Monday

Just when I thought middle school had settled into a predictable rhythm, Mrs. Taylor dropped another surprise: the annual talent show.

We weren't required to participate, but she insisted that every class perform *something*. The thought of standing in front of the entire school made my stomach twist. Me? Performing? Again, I felt the old panic rising.

Riley nudged me. "come on, Evan. It could be fun!"

I blinked. "Fun? Fun is surviving dodgeball without getting hit in the face."

Noah laughed. "Yeah, but think of it as a challenge. Step 19 of your COMEBACK PLAN: face challenges head-on."

I groaned. "Right. challenge. Got it."

We brainstormed ideas after school. Riley suggested a short skit, Noah proposed a song, and Mason Hill, of course, volunteered to narrate dramatically. Somehow, we decided on a combination: a comedic skit about middle school life, featuring our robot as a cameo.

Rehearsals were··· chaotic.

Mason Hill tried to take over the narration again. Sarah, who had joined at the last minute, tripped over the robot's power cord. Noah forgot his lines repeatedly, and I kept accidentally knocking over props. By the end, it looked like a disaster waiting to happen.

The day of the show arrived. Backstage, I could hear kids practicing juggling, magic tricks, and piano solos. My palms were sweaty, my heart raced, and I wanted to vanish.

"Remember," Riley whispered, "COMEBACK PLAN. Step 12. Focus on what you can control."

I nodded. Deep breath.

When it was our turn, we stepped onto the stage. Mason Hill tried his usual overdramatic narration. I improvised my lines as needed, and the robot performed its tiny programmed moves. Chaos ensued—props fell, Noah improvised wrong lines—but somehow, it worked.

The audience laughed at the right moments, cheered for the robot, and even applauded our group at the end. We survived, and more than that, we were actually entertaining.

Afterward, Mason Hill muttered, "Not bad, Turner. Not bad at all."

Walking home that evening, Riley and Noah high-fived me repeatedly. "You're officially a middle school legend," Riley said.

I laughed. "Maybe not a legend··· more like a survivor with style."

That night, I wrote in my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 22: Embrace chaos. Stage fright can't stop you if you improvise and focus.

I realized something important: middle school wasn't about avoiding disasters—it was about surviving them, laughing along the way, and sometimes even coming out on top.

Chapter 29 - The Big Test

Tuesday

If there's one thing middle school likes more than rumors, it's tests. Big tests. Monster tests that make you question your entire existence. Today was one of those days.

Mrs. Jenkins handed out the math exam, a 50-question mix of fractions, algebra, and random word problems that somehow involved squirrels, trains, and ice cream trucks. My stomach twisted. I glanced around. Riley looked calm. Noah looked nervous but determined. Mason Hill smirked like he was already done.

I took a deep breath and remembered my COMEBACK PLAN: Step 19—face challenges head-on. I had survived dodgeball, group projects, rumors, science fairs, field trips, and even the talent show. A math test, while terrifying, was just another challenge.

Question by question, I worked steadily, focusing on what I could control. I skipped the squirrel-train problem temporarily, solved everything else, and then returned to it. Slowly, the answers came together. By the end of the exam, I felt... proud. Not perfect, but capable.

After class, Riley whispered, "You did it! I could tell you stayed calm the whole time."

Noah added, "Yeah, even Mason Hill admitted you didn't freak out."

Walking to lunch, I realized something important: surviving middle school wasn't about never making mistakes. It was about staying calm, solving problems, and learning from chaos. Even giant math tests didn't seem as scary when I faced them with a plan.

At lunch, Mason Hill approached me again. I braced for ridicule.

"You know," he said, "I think you might actually be… good at this middle school thing."

I blinked. "Thanks, I think?"

He shrugged and walked off. I laughed. Even Mason Hill's approval felt like a small trophy.

That night, I updated my COMEBACK PLAN notebook:

Step 23: Big tests are just challenges. Stay calm, do your best, and celebrate progress.

I closed my notebook and smiled. I had survived another week, faced multiple disasters, and even handled big challenges like a (sort-of) middle school expert.

Chapter 30 - The Grand Finale

Friday

I never thought I'd get here: the end of the week, the end of a long string of disasters, and somehow… I was actually smiling. Middle school had thrown everything at me—dodgeball catastrophes, rumors, chaotic group projects, science fairs, field trips, and giant tests—but I survived. More than that, I grew.

The morning started with a small victory. Riley, Noah, and I walked into the cafeteria, and for the first time, I didn't feel invisible or worried about rumors. Kids waved, smiled, and even Mason Hill gave me a nod that wasn't sarcastic. I had my group, my friends, and a sense of… accomplishment.

Later, Mrs. Taylor surprised us with a "celebration assembly" for students who showed growth and persistence. My name was called for perseverance and creativity. I stood on stage, a little awkward, holding my third-place ribbon from the science fair, my robot safely tucked under my arm, and my COMEBACK PLAN notebook in hand.

I realized then that middle school wasn't about being perfect. It wasn't about winning every game, acing every test, or impressing everyone. It was about trying, learning, laughing at the chaos, and surviving—even when life threw water balloons, glitter glue, or rumor tornadoes your way.

Riley whispered, "See? All those small wins added up."

Noah grinned. "And you didn't even need to dodge a flying sandwich today."

Mason Hill, standing nearby, muttered, "Not bad, Turner. Not bad at all."

I smiled, thinking about all the COMEBACK PLAN steps I'd written:

- Face chaos head-on
- Focus on what you can control
- Laugh at disasters
- celebrate small victories
- Keep moving forward

They all added up. I wasn't invincible, and middle school wouldn't ever be perfect, but I was learning to handle it—sometimes with style, sometimes with clumsiness, but always with persistence.

That night, I wrote in my notebook one final time:

Step 24: Middle school is messy, unpredictable, and hilarious. Survive it, enjoy it, and grow.

I closed my COMEBACK PLAN notebook, put my robot on my desk, and looked out the window. Chaos would return tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that—but I was ready. I wasn't just surviving middle school anymore. I was thriving in my own way, and that felt amazing.